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••WITCHES AND NUNS

EILEEN MYLES

FROM: THE INFERNO (A POET'S NOVEL)

I had a soft blue chenille bathrobe I brought to New York. Probably I got it in Filenes's Basement cause that's where I got everything. And quickly it became adopted by both Alice and Helene. It was like an education into living in a large family, which I had always wanted. Everything gets used, quick. They would laugh wickedly about what the bathrobe was going through daily, hanging on the bathroom door, when it had time off from them. It was an experience in sharing. Watching something I liked basically go away. My bathrobe was turning into a rag and meanwhile, I was joining. It was strange, knowing these two sisters. One was the friend, Helene, who was actually the younger sister of the one who was truly my friend, Judy, who will not be in this story at all. Though I should have known Helene better, I was really knowing Alice in this wild

and crazy way. It was like she was a flaming tree in the middle of the house. Her eyes were green; one of them had a spot in the middle of it. Just like a big tall cat, that's how she felt. And I was going to fall right into her world, I couldn't help myself. I had met at least one lesbian before and this is what it seemed to be. I was so curious about what they knew, and it was kind of like a deformity, something I shouldn't look at in the street but I couldn't help but staring. I felt I'd go crazy. There was all that feminist stuff about lesbians and witches, but you know there really was something to it. They were all off dancing in the dark somehow. Cackling around a light. Somewhere it was happening. I remember going one night to the Duchess and all of Alice's friends were there. One was a famous former nun who was now a lesbian politician. She was Irish and felt deeply familiar. I could see her being a nun. She had that steady thing. They were female but they had nothing in the way. It

was just this woman bearing down on you. This one, Jean, was supposedly an alcoholic. It was obvious, she was there in her leisure suit, kind of sweating and throwing back drinks. I remember gaining her attention for about a minute. I felt her greed. I was dying to stay there, but I couldn't. There was another woman, a black woman, who held my hand too long once as she sat on a stool. She was saying goodnight I think and she said good night, Darling, and smiled at me and as I was walking away she wouldn't let go. I felt like she was just doing this to scare me. I remember going into the Duchess in a skirt just so everyone could see I wasn't serious. Then I got drunk and decided to do a split when I was dancing, to indicate I was cool--in some crazy floral skirt. I can see it, and I embarrassed Alice at least. I thought I was wild. But still I was in this treacherous world where women older than me had once been in the convent and were now lesbians. And where did they go after this?

Alice had once been a mental patient. That was another group she belonged to. It was like former mental patients of New York. And I think she had loved a nun and that's how she got out. Or maybe that's how she got in. I felt there was a lot of dropping from one pot into the next. From one pot of woman to another. I was meanwhile trying to learn to be a poet, and didn't want to be waylaid into being gay because I wouldn't be taken seriously. There were lesbian poetry magazines which Alice would show me, one called Aphra, one called Thirteenth Moon, but clearly it was a trickle and it might dry up. You didn't want to get caught there.

I would say by the time I lived in New York my poems were no longer abstract. I mean by the time I knew poets. I wasn't writing about a symbolic world in which everything was all mental and preachy. I could tell when a poem had a little weight, it was real.

For me, that weight is about feeling. I'm not an exclusively emotional poet, but I start with a problem and I keep returning to the feeling of it, not the idea. I don't replace it. It seems if you stay in an actual groove (a non-verbal pot) then the poem never really gets lost or boring.

I'm thinking of songs, for instance, in which even the silliest words feel strong because of the gravity of the singer's feeling. In music you listen to say Sinatra cruising along some standard and he's the captain of the ship. The song is a boat. The guy just knows where to lean, he knows the reach. The water is the feeling. Poetry's different. It's one thing. All song. Not exactly that, but kind of like MTV, this joker just walking through the world, her mouth wide open, singing.

I left graduate school, almost immediately, and all I had was poetry and Alice. I didn't have

Alice, I never would, but she was what I had to think about. I had a number of boyfriends and I could write poems about them, very specific poems and it felt okay because I had this strong feeling and it wasn't located in this relationship, or that one. It was like my love was god. I was used to loving god, I had grown up that way, having the idea of god helped organize my life. And now when I didn't have god I knew how god felt, being fully occupied (with my singing) which I hadn't felt in a while. I mean in college I couldn't get over the possibilities in education. The amazing books and going on that way for years. And then I did. I couldn't stand things being open for too long. I had to let education die. I had done that and now I could live forever in poetry and love. That's what I felt. I was in love with Alice. If you can't tell someone you love them, and I never did, then depending on whether the person is kind, and Alice was fairly kind, you can just let the colors of the love go wilder and deepen.

I remember Alice having a raspberry coloured scarf. She was like fruit on a tree. She wore a pea coat and her scarf looked great when her face got red and it was cold. She was very popular in the lesbian world at that time. I feel she had this great innocence. She was this tall thin cute boy. If a twenty-eight year old woman in puberty could be gangly, she was. It seems so young now. I don't know who I was in this communication, just kind of observing. Since I couldn't be there: I was straight, Helene's friend, their roommate. I was a mirror. All I can say is I saw her.

We decided to get dogs. She got Amelia and I got James. Hers was black, mine was brown, or kind of tan. James was a skinny desperate dog.

My whole life with James was pretty hopeless. I was twenty-four. There was no way I was going to be a good parent. I'd walk him along

Riverside Park where people had dogs named Mrs. Peel. They were a young, fun, happening crowd. They didn't trust me, and there's no reason why they should. I wasn't straight, and I didn't have a professional job. And I wasn't a loser, either.

I'd tie James up outside bars and get bombed for hours. Come outside and he'd be gone. I'd post notices all over Riverside Park and in laundromats. Then the phone calls would come, the right dog, the wrong dog. A woman with a Russian accent called one day and she said your dog is in the lobby. I came down on the elevator and it was James. But my address hadn't been on the flyer!

Sometimes of course I'd walk both dogs. Alice was pretty busy and of course I had the time. And I had competition. There was a grim Marxist-looking woman, a greasy blonde who

obviously had a crush on Alice and she took up the slack when I couldn't help out. The woman was the religious editor at Majority Report, an embarrassing thing in itself. I'd bump into her on the street, with or without dogs, and we'd just glare at each other. Obviously we had the same boss, and the existence of each other simply lowered both of our positions.

This story is forcing me right downtown. My apartment had been on West End Ave. There was Helene, there was Terry, I forgot to mention her; there was Ralph, Alice and myself. There weren't that many rooms and suddenly everyone was leaving. It was one of the apartments you think about for years. The gates on the windows and being shocked because I'd never seen window gates before. Or roaches. Fucking roaches crawling everywhere. The kitchen was yellow. The elevator was fake wood, so cheap-looking. We had a huge window, a view

practically of the river, I think. Peg board with things hanging off it, pots and pans. All so practical. \$235 a month and one by one, we left. I was moving downtown. I can't remember where Helene went. I just don't know. She wound up back in Boston again, married.

Alice moved to Soho and accidentally I moved into the same building as her girlfriend Sherri.

I was so relieved when Alice finally got a girlfriend. At last I could stop. I mean I was like a hungry dog, snooping around in the Duchess for her. She was kind to me, smiling. Hi, Leena. Sometimes I'd sit down with her and her friends. Now at least, I was off the hook. I liked Sherri. She was cute. She had two little blonde boys. They invited me into their relationship; I could sit at the table with them. They showed me pictures of their vacations. They'd go to like upstate, wherever that was, and stand around hugging each other in their leather jackets. That's

a good one, I'd say pointing to a picture I liked, being the kid. Alice had an aviator jacket. You could see Sherri making Alice cool. And Sherri gave me a bed. Sherri was a carpenter. She wore carpenter pants and used to be a model and she was active in a group called Women in the Trades. There was a group for everything. The bed was like something that would have killed Christ. Sherri said, it is so butch. Give me that word! Giant butcher-block legs. One frame on another, distanced by these pegs. I mean, I had this bed for years. It was a gift.

